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Governor turns her back on mental health consumers

LANSING – Sen. Beverly S. Hammerstrom today said she isn't surprised the governor vetoed the legislation that would force Wayne County to establish a mental health authority, but she is deeply disappointed.

The bills would have conditioned the receipt of state and Medicaid funds by the Detroit-Wayne County Community Mental Health Agency on that entity's conversion to an independent authority and would have addressed a long-standing concern about conflicts of interest by stating that no city or county employees may serve on the DWCCMH board.

"It is not a surprise to me that the governor chose old political buddies over the mental health consumers," said Hammerstrom, R-Temperance. "I am not sure how much more time she thinks the county should be allowed to waste Medicaid money that should be going to services, but it has already been years too long."

Hammerstrom began encouraging Wayne County to move to authority status in early 2001 when she became concerned that the structure and inefficiencies of the current system might jeopardize Michigan's federal waiver. The waiver allows the state to maintain the community-based system and prevents privatization of public mental health services.

"I got resistance from Ed McNamara and I am still getting it from Bob Ficano. It is time the governor and the public see this for what it is – an issue of control and power," Hammerstrom said. "I and a majority of my colleagues in the Legislature want to see an independent board that will focus solely on mental health services and the individuals who need and deserve them."

In her veto message, the governor said that the bills failed to address the current board composition of six city and six county appointees and the "impasse that often arises."

"Once again, the governor has failed to check the facts. In the more than 30-year history of the 6-6 board, there have been very few tie votes. The issue of the board composition is a convenient cop-out. It's also an insult to all of the dedicated people who have served on the board," Hammerstrom said. "The governor needs to learn that just writing something in her veto letter doesn't make it true."

Hammerstrom has indicated she will reintroduce the bills in the new session that begins Jan. 12, 2005.

"The consumers of the Detroit-Wayne Community Mental Health System deserve another chance at finally getting help," Hammerstrom said. "And people across the state need protection from the loss of our federal waiver. Maybe the governor isn't willing to help protect mental health clients, but I'm not turning my back on them."

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